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KING LEAR AND THE ART OF FATHOMING

The second of *King Lear*'s three great storm scenes opens with Kent, disguised as Caius, repeatedly urging the king to enter a hovel located offstage. After batting away Kent's first three pleas, Lear responds to the fourth with a speech that begins in refusal, moves grudgingly into assent, turns sideways towards the Fool, and concludes as an apostrophe (introduced as a prayer) on the impoverished. Here it is as printed in the 1623 Folio:

Prythee go in thy selfe, seeke thine owne ease,
This tempest will not giue me leaue to ponder
On things would hurt me more, but Ile goe in,
In Boy, go first. You houselesse pouertie, *Exit.*
Nay get thee in; Ile pray, and then Ile sleepe.
Poore naked wretches, where so ere you are
That bide the pelting of this pittillesse storme,
How shall your House-lesse heads, and vnfed sides,
Your lop'd, and window'd raggednesse defend you
From seasons such as these? O I haue tane
Too little care of this: Take Physicke, Pompe,

Expose thy selfe to feele what wretches feele,
That thou maist shake the superflux to them,
And shew the Heauens more iust. (1804–17)¹

The speech following directly upon Lear's reads: "Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe; poore *Tom*" (1819): the king's apostrophe on the wretched appears to have given birth to a figure—Poor Tom, the Bedlam Beggar—who emblemizes that condition.²

The following essay considers the meanings and the implications of this enticing and baffling Folio line, exploring its resonances as a means of offering some broader reflections on *Lear*'s radical dramaturgy. (The line's absence from the 1608 Quarto is not a concern of this essay, though readers interested in the recently-reinvigorated debate over the relationship between *King Lear*'s Folio and Quarto texts are invited to follow this note.)³ I shall come to argue that the speech both comments upon and contributes towards the disorientation *Lear* provokes in its audience: that paying attention to the concealed depths and the suggestion of partial or failed navigation the line calls to mind can help us think more carefully about our experience of the play. For all its obscurity (or even *because* of its obscurity), I shall argue, this is a speech that captures, in miniature, our response to *King Lear*—and perhaps also to tragedy more generally.

SHAKESPEARE AND THE ART OF FATHOMING

Since antiquity, European seafarers have taken soundings by dropping a lead and line (or lead-line) into water to measure its depth.⁴ The main purpose of this practice was to avoid the potentially fatal mishap of running aground; but in Shakespeare's time, and for a long period

afterwards, measuring the depth of water in “fathoms” (that is, lengths of six feet) also had a more sophisticated navigational function. Covered in tallow, the lead plummet brought up loose material from the sea bed, and by interpreting two pieces of data—the material and the depth at which it was found—the navigator could estimate his position on the surface of the globe. Here, for example, is William Bourne’s treatise *A Regiment for the Sea* (1574) advising seafarers on how to manage their way around the Isle of Portland, off the coast of Dorset:

At the com[m]ing from Portland you shall haue .35. fadoms, and small shingels. And when you be nie to Portland .30. fadoms, & stones like beans: & this sounding will last till S. Aldam[.]⁵

The great advantage of this method of navigation was that it could be practiced in foggy conditions, when sight of land or sky—enabling coastal or celestial navigation—was prohibited. A ship could crawl carefully along the sea’s surface taking regular soundings, rather as a mole feels its way, blindly, across open terrain. It has become a commonplace in oceanic studies (or what is sometimes called the “blue humanities”) that Westerners—even those involved in oceanic studies—typically treat the sea as little more than a blank space.⁶ But this was decidedly not the attitude taken by European seafarers prior to the twentieth century; to find their way around, they relied on a sophisticated understanding of the topography and material composition of the ocean floor.⁷ When taking observations with an astrolabe, quadrant, or cross-staff, and making use of what they could see but not reach (heavenly bodies), such mariners did, to be sure, treat the sea as essentially a plane or blank surface; but when practicing the art of fathoming, a tactile art, they treated it as a detailed form, attending both to its depth and to the texture, color, and even the taste of its dark reaches.⁸

The plummet did not always touch the bottom. In Shakespeare's time, most ocean navigators would use 100-fathom lines; at the deepest point of the Atlantic Ocean (the Puerto Rico Trench, at 28, 373 feet), this line, fully extended, would reach approximately two per cent of the way down. This is an extreme case, of course; but in effect, whenever they were off continental shelves early modern seafarers were in "fathomless" depths. Dropping a line and finding no ground still provided information as to where they were *not* (and suggested they were in no immediate danger of shipwreck), but the more valuable knowledge was gathered when the mariner "came into soundings" and could attempt to plot a depth measurement and a seabed sample onto a map of existing ocean-knowledge, such as Bourne's *Regiment for the Sea* or a "rutter." Even at its most effective, however, fathoming provided no more than part of a picture. Early modern navigation consistently worked within margins of error: winds, currents, and the inaccuracies involved in using instruments both simple (the log and line) and sophisticated (the astrolabe) required the navigator to be able to manage uncertainty and compare potentially conflicting sources of information. But in imaginative terms, there was something uniquely strange in the art of fathoming. Groping in the dark, the leadsman brought up a piece of an eerie world, and in so doing he gained a limited knowledge of that world which, in turn, provided a hint as to the ship's geographical position. By indirections, he did his best to find directions out.

As far back as 1964, in his book *Shakespeare and the Sea*, the naval officer turned literary critic A. F. Falconer established that Shakespeare took a substantial interest in the art of fathoming. The playwright knew, for example, about the difficulties involved in navigating waters around the south coast of England. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Salarino reports that Antonio has "a ship of rich lading wrackt on the narrow Seas; the Goodwins I thinke they call the place, a very dangerous flat, and fatall, where the carcasses of many a tall ship, lye buried" (1221–4). An uneven seabed was what made Goodwin Sands such a "fatall" place: the historian

of navigation D. W. Waters cites a Dutch text, translated into English in 1612 as the *Light of Navigation*, which warns that “at one casting of the lead” in these treacherous waters “you shall have 26 fathome, and at another cast of the lead you shall be fast upon the sand.”⁹ A more far-reaching geography of the deep can be found in a later comedy, *As You Like It*. Describing her passion for Orlando, Rosalind laments to her cousin: “that thou didst know how many fathome deepe I am in loue: but it cannot bee sounded: my affection hath an vnknowne bottome, like the Bay of Portugall” (2111–14).¹⁰ The Bay of Portugal is, Edward Sugden informs us, what early modern Englishmen called “The sea off the coast of Portugal between Oporto and the headland of Cintra,” a body of water that attained “1400 fathoms within 40m of the coast.”¹¹ Given that this was a depth well beyond the reach of early modern plummets, Rosalind was right to suggest that the bay had an “vnknown bottome.”

Rather more interesting than these allusions to specific sea-beds, however, are the moments where Shakespeare uses fathoming as a figure for seeking out knowledge. Building on Falconer’s observation that the thought of unplumbed depths “fill[s] the mind with an overwhelming sense of the unreachable,” Dan Brayton has offered an illuminating analysis of what he calls Shakespeare’s “benthic imagination,” illustrating how the playwright uses the language of fathoming to suggest “a link between the physical and conceptual human grasp.”¹² This connection was available, in part, because a fathom is roughly the distance a (fairly tall) man can reach from fingertip to fingertip. “Derived from an Old English word for ‘the embracing arms’, as well as ‘grasp, power’ and ‘the object of embrace’,” writes Brayton, “the infinitive ‘to fathom’ connects physical reach (the length of outstretched arms) with understanding (*OED*).” Rather glossing over the distinction between the word’s verb and noun forms, Brayton goes on to note that the “*OED* cites Shakespeare for coining the use of ‘fathom’ for ‘understanding’ in [an] instance from *Othello*: ‘Another of his fathom they have none/To

lead their business' (I.i.153–4).”¹³ In this passage, I would argue, the word suggests not so much reach as *girth*—Othello has a capability, a *capacity*, exceeding that of others.

Though frequently using *sound* to connote “seek to ascertain (a matter, a person’s views, etc.), esp. by cautious or indirect questioning” (*OED* v. 2, 6b), Shakespeare never uses *fathom* as a verb; but he does employ it as a noun on fifteen occasions (sixteen if you count the repetition in the single line of the Folio *Lear*), and it is not only in *Othello* that the word moves towards figurative terrain.¹⁴ Consider, for example, the moment when Prospero, speaking of abjuring his rough magic, brings together the verb *sound* and the noun *fathoms*:

I’le breake my staffe,
Bury it certaine fadomes in the earth,
And deeper then did euer Plummet sound
Ile drowne my booke. (2005–8)

This speech is not simply pointing to a physical depth. In Prospero’s decision to bury his staff deep in the earth and his book deep in the sea, we hear his desire to sever mental as well as physical ties to those objects and what they represent. This sense of dissolving a connection to the buried object is also active in Ariel’s ditty sung to the grieving Ferdinand, in which we encounter possibly the most famous use of *fathom* in the English language:

*Full fadom fiue thy Father lies,
Of his bones are Corrall made[.]* (539–40)

In addition to suggesting that Ferdinand must reconfigure his relationship to his drowned father, the word *fathom* here breaks away from its place in the song’s syntax to feed into the

next line, as if to ask: “Can you *imagine* that your father’s bones are now coral? Is this *thinkable*?”¹⁵

“FATHOM, AND HALFE, FATHOM AND HALFE”

The complexity of the line “Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe; poore *Tom*” begins before its first spoken word. The name-tag in the Folio text is “*Edg.*” (for “Edgar”), but the speech indirectly identifies the speaker as someone else. As Simon Palfrey has brilliantly demonstrated, it is difficult to be precise about where Edgar ends and Tom begins, or indeed who or what Tom is *when* he begins: more Tyler Durden or Edward Hyde than Cesario or Aliena, Tom exceeds the grasp of Edgar. The following pages are concerned more with what this single speech means than with the identity of its speaker,¹⁶ but of course one topic cannot be properly considered without the other. I will draw attention to this issue where necessary, but for the moment it suffices to say that I will refer to the line’s speaker as Edgar-Tom.

While both Falconer’s book and Brayton’s essay glance at the line in question, identifying it as the call of a leadsman, neither critic reflects on *why* its speaker might be posing as such a figure or dwells on what, precisely, Edgar-Tom’s utterance might mean.¹⁷ Since the hovel does not appear to be flooded with water when the king and his party finally enter it two scenes later, we must assume that Edgar-Tom is speaking figuratively. One way of dealing with the line would be simply to dismiss it as a piece of comic exaggeration—a salty version of “it’s raining cats and dogs.” But given the highly symbolic nature of the action at this stage of *King Lear*, and given the freight of meaning borne by Shakespeare’s uses of the word *fathom* elsewhere, this explanation is hardly satisfactory. A more productive approach might be to

consider the line as part of a cluster of images of the deep within *King Lear*—to suggest that it points not only to an imagined depth, but to other parts of the play.

Two passages invite inspection. In act one, scene four, the king is outraged at the lack of hospitality shown him by Goneril, and rails:

Ingratitude! thou Marble-hearted Fiend,
More hideous when thou shew'st thee in a Child,
Then the Sea-monster. (771–3)

In the Quarto text, a variation on this image appears when Albany laments the perfidy of both Goneril and Regan:

Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform'd?
[...]
If that the heauens doe not their visible spirits
Send quickly downe to tame this vild offences, it will come
Humanity must perforce pray on it self like monsters of the deepe. (4.2.40–49)¹⁸

In both Lear's and Albany's outbursts, the sea monsters are, it appears, in a synecdochic relationship with the deep sea: part of a riotous, chaotic site that is the antithesis of the patriarchal order that would have daughters respect and obey their fathers.¹⁹ If we view act three's storm as somehow connected to the topsy-turvy state of affairs brought about by the rebellious children Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, as have so many of the play's readers (and as, in a way, does Lear himself), then we might imagine Edgar-Tom "sounding" a socio-political flux of the kind Shakespeare's Ulysses warns will be released if "degree" is neglected

(*Troilus and Cressida*, 534–97). It is, perhaps, as though the figurative chaotic depth glimpsed in Lear’s and Albany’s speeches, both of which *liken* “uncivilized” behaviour to (the actions of) benthic monsters, is *realized* in the storm: somehow cognisant of the metaphor limned elsewhere in the play, Edgar-Tom registers the presence of this chaotic body of water by figuratively dropping a plummet into it.

This is not, however, the only way to read the line. It may be that Edgar-Tom is acting out a more fully-realized fictional scenario of which his speech offers the merest glimpse: that he imagines himself on a ship, calling out a depth that is not worryingly profound but instead troublingly shallow: nine feet is, after all, a lot of water to stand in, but not a lot of water to sail in. Such a cry would be figuratively appropriate given *King Lear*’s descent into tragedy (a condition frequently described in the language of shipwreck, in Shakespeare and elsewhere), and would take on even greater resonance if we took Edgar-Tom’s utterance to figure forth, in a further metaphorical step, a ship of state—for this scene presents a self-deposed king charging around in an ungoverned way. A further and related possibility, first suggested by George Lyman Kittredge, is that Edgar-Tom is imaginatively measuring the depth of water flooding the hold of a ship.²⁰ In this scenario, the water is again worryingly deep rather than troublingly shallow, but the anticipated upshot is once more shipwreck. The key point to make at this stage is that the line is not locked into a single meaning; when attempting to gauge the significance of Edgar-Tom’s reading (that is, his measurement), we are ourselves confronted with a plurality of what are, apparently, conflicting yet simultaneously valid readings.

While not commenting on the line’s *plurality* of possible metaphorical applications, Steve Mentz, who alongside Dan Brayton has been at the forefront of the “oceanic turn” in Shakespeare studies, is very much alive to its symbolic power. In his book *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*, Mentz pays close attention to the line’s vision of chaos:

As [Edgar] describes (or imagines) the hovel, it's full of water, nine feet deep (a fathom and a half), already over his head. Water has filled up this last human refuge, making it as inhospitable as the world outside. Edgar sees, more clearly than the other characters, that this play has no safe or sustainable shelter. The image of the Bedlam beggar floating inside the hovel forecloses any hoped-for political or familial reconciliation. Lear has tried to salvage a moral order in his just-expressed desire to "Take physic, pomp ... And show the heavens more just" (3.4.33–6). But while the king can imagine caring for the "poor naked wretches" (3.4.28), his regenerative vision crashes head-long into Edgar's watery madness. No king can control the sea.²¹

I find Mentz's exegesis a touch confusing. Are we supposed to imagine the speaker "*floating* inside the hovel," or submerged beneath water "*already over his head*"? If the latter, how could he call out at all? And is the speaker ("Edgar" or the "Bedlam beggar"?) understood to be part of the image, or to stand outside it? These confusions, inadvertently or otherwise, capture the line's conceptual superfluity: in part because of the uncertainty surrounding the identity and situation of its speaker, we simply cannot work out precisely what image the line is supposed to body forth, and this limits our capacity to comprehend and interpret it.

There are two further points to take from Mentz's rich response to this moment in *King Lear*. The first is his subsequent suggestion that "Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe" inaugurates a "false-floor" effect in *King Lear*—a term he uses to describe how, "Whenever it seems as if the play has bottomed out, whenever a floor beneath the suffering seems to have been reached, a new catastrophe opens to plunge us into the depths."²² What I wish to add to this sharp observation is a sense of how Edgar-Tom's vision of plunging, of moving along a vertical axis, coheres with *King Lear*'s celebrated concern with "nothing." Three episodes are of particular relevance. As part of his division of the kingdom in the play's first scene, Lear

had insisted that he be allowed to keep one hundred knights in his retinue; in act two, scene four, as he argues with his two elder daughters, that number tapers off almost in the manner of a radioactive half-life. Goneril and Regan ask their father why he needs, first one hundred knights, then fifty, then five-and-twenty, then ten, then five. Finally, Regan asks “What need one?” (1563), a question that propels Lear into his first great examination of what it means to be human. “O reason not the need” (1564), begins a speech insisting that to be human is to be oneself *plus* something else, not oneself and *nothing* else. The second episode that concerns me here is Lear’s re-examination of the same problem, which comes soon after Edgar-Tom’s first line. “Reading” the figure of Poor Tom, Lear decides that the *real* human is, in fact, one who owes the “Worme no Silke; the Beast, no Hide; the Sheepe, no Wooll” (1884–5). With nothing added, Lear argues, such a human is the “thing it selfe” (1886). The third episode is the other occasion in *Lear* which features the word *fathom*. No longer in the assumed humour of Poor Tom, but not quite “himself” either (or the Mummerset peasant he will later become in this scene), Edgar tells his father Gloucester, who has supposedly fallen from a cliff:

Had’st thou beene ought
 But Gozemore, Feathers, Ayre,
 (So many fathome downe precipitating)
 Thou’dst shiuer’d like an Egge[.] (2490–3)

All contributing towards *King Lear*’s unsettling mathematics, these three moments could be plotted on a graph, with knights, items of clothing, and blind old men tumbling down the vertical axis until shuddering into the horizontal axis. “Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe,” by contrast, takes us *past* zero—*through* the horizontal axis and onto the other side. It is even possible that the point measured by Edgar-Tom moves down the vertical axis as he speaks:

while it is risky to place much weight on the punctuation of early modern printed texts, it is worth noting that the Folio's commas imply that at least two measurements are given. Perhaps we are to imagine the speaker calling out the measurement of six feet, then registering that the water has just become three feet deeper (or, perhaps, further unspooling the line), and then repeating this measurement.²³ Whether we are dealing with a static or a mobile measurement, however, the crucial point is that Edgar-Tom draws attention to a point below zero, and in so doing contributes towards a particular dimension of this tragedy called attention to by Mentz—its tortuous insistence on putting both characters and audience through more than they thought possible.²⁴

The second thing to take from Mentz's discussion of "Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe" is his recognition that, in addition to sounding the keynote of *Lear*, the words have *local* significance. "Lear has tried to salvage a moral order," writes Mentz, and "his regenerative vision crashes head-long into Edgar's watery madness." While agreeing that the two speeches are importantly connected, I would want to characterize their relation rather differently. By way of reminder, here are the words Lear speaks just before Edgar-Tom's irruption:

O I haue tane

Too little care of this: Take Physicke, Pompe,

Expose thy selfe to feelee what wretches feelee,

That thou maist shake the superflux to them,

And shew the Heauens more iust. (1804–17)

Rather than regarding "Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe" as a speech into which Lear's "crashes," I would see it as one that extends or comments upon Lear's vision. In the king's speech, "Pompe" is evacuated in liquid form; the "superflux" shaken from Lear's body is

figured as faecal matter or menstrual blood²⁵ (the latter would make this episode one of several in which the king feminizes his body), and this evacuation results not in an equal and orderly redistribution of wealth and property but instead a fluid mess.²⁶ Perhaps, we might suggest, it is this liquid mess which Edgar-Tom pretends to fathom with his lead and line. Certainly, the two speeches are obscurely yet closely interlinked: these are the only words Edgar-Tom speaks that might form a line of pentameter; formally as well as in its content, then, Edgar-Tom's speech registers and replies to (rather than, as Mentz would have it, arrests or explodes) Lear's apostrophe. The desire to form a pentameter may, in fact, explain why Shakespeare employs the unusual formulation "fathom and half" rather than "fathom and *a* half."²⁷

But what kind of reply is Edgar-Tom making? Critics who have dwelt on Lear's speech tend, like Mentz, to regard it as a site of regeneration within the play: in recognising the condition of others, we are told, Lear begins to emerge from his poisonous solipsism; in sympathizing with the impoverished, he takes his first steps towards recovery. If we follow this reading, then it might be suggested that Edgar-Tom's line obscurely accredits the king's new "level" of understanding: it records the "depth" of knowledge attained by the king, this argument might go—one symbolized in his release of privilege. What troubles me about this reading is that I am not sure Lear has achieved any such depth. Is it unfair to hear, in his desire to "Expose" himself "to feele what wretches feele," something of the present-day politician who, after living on social security for a week, claims afterwards to have "learned a lot" from the experience? Perhaps. But what is certain is that Lear's evacuation is supposed to make *him* feel better: "Pompe" (some version or dimension of the king) is to "Take Physicke"—this is a purge, a *medicinal* act. The impoverished who might benefit from Lear's largesse are glimpsed in the midst of his apostrophe, but quickly fade into the background as Lear turns his focus, not uncharacteristically, towards himself. The king's solipsism is then further signalled once "Poor

Tom” emerges and Lear sees in him nothing but a reflection of his own situation: “Did’st thou giue all to thy Daughters? And art thou come to this?” (1830–1).

There are moments in *King Lear* when the tragic protagonist sees more than we can; but this is not one of those moments.²⁸ In my view, rather than affirming the king’s newfound understanding, the line may—among other things—mock his claim to profundity. As I have stated above, nine feet of liquid is a lot to stand in, but it hardly suggests a significant depth. In fact, Edgar-Tom’s almost comically precise observation (this is the only instance of a half-fathom in Shakespeare) may parody Lear’s prior attempts—or at least stated attempts—at careful measurement: first, his strategy of measuring love according to speech, so that he can then dole out a commensurate amount of land (53–8); and subsequently, his assumption that he can gauge the differing loves of Goneril and Regan by considering how many knights each will allow him to keep in his retinue. “Thy fifty doth yet double fiue and twenty,” Lear tells Goneril, “And thou art twice her Loue” (1557–8).

FATHOMING AND ORIENTATION

It is worth thinking even more carefully about Edgar-Tom’s line as an act of *measurement*. This is the only of Shakespeare’s uses of the word *fathom* in which someone is taking a reading, and thus partaking (we might reasonably assume) in an act of navigation. In all other cases, the word indicates some pre-determined or indeterminable depth, circumference, or height. Because of this, I want to argue, “Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe” would have suggested to its audience a concern with orientation.

A cognate passage from *Cymbeline* will add some ballast to this claim. In an episode that reworks *Lear*’s ending, reconfiguring tragedy as romance, Arviragus enters carrying in his

arms the supposedly-dead Imogen, disguised as Fidele. Belarius, contemplating the condition he believes has brought about Fidele's premature death, reflects on the scene thus:

Oh Melancholly,
Who euer yet could sound thy bottome? Finde
The Ooze, to shew what Coast thy sluggish care
Might'st easilest harbour in. (2508–11)

Modern editors have struggled to pin down Belarius's image. Like most, Martin Butler replaces the Folio's "care" with "crare," explaining that the latter is a "small trading boat." This emendation lends the image a greater unity of maritime diction, but it seems to me rather speculative: if Shakespeare did intend "crare," then he employed a very rare word that he would never use again.²⁹ If anything, I would suggest, the emendation makes the image more diffuse, as "Melancholly" becomes the subject of both "bottome" and "crare," so that we are asked to picture it both as a sea (or, as Butler would have it, a river) and as a craft *upon* that sea. While hardly coming into sharp focus, the image is perhaps clearer if we recognize—as Shakespeare's audience would have recognized—that fathoming is a navigational practice that aims to establish location. As I understand him, Belarius figures melancholy as a sea so deep that a lead and line—which would help one orient oneself, and potentially find safe harbour—cannot reach its bottom (the "Ooze" on the seabed).³⁰ It is a melancholy as deep as Rosalind's love.

The shallowness of the water (if it *is* water) measured by Edgar-Tom's phrase "Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe" does, admittedly, suggest that what is at stake is avoiding shipwreck rather than establishing location; but some sense of fathoming's function as a means of establishing location is, I think, latent in the line. I want now to read it, in fact, as a plea for orientation—one that voices our desire as readers and playgoers. Making the connection (noted

by Brayton) between “the physical and conceptual human grasp,” I want to suggest, Edgar-Tom’s act of navigation registers the peculiar sense of disorientation *King Lear* elicits.

This is a disorientation that takes several forms and can be ascribed to several sources. In the more directly geographical sense, *King Lear*’s landscape, as has frequently been noted, is unusually vague. The relations between its coordinates (the seats of Gloucester, Lear, and Goneril, for example) are difficult to determine; and while, as in the history plays, the connection between individual and national interest is established in the way character names are linked to geographical areas—Cornwall, Gloucester, Kent—there is little sense that *King Lear*’s figures command support in a specific region we could sit down and draw on a map (as does, for example, the Northumberland of the *Henry IV* plays). Dover constitutes the play’s clearest geographical coordinate, serving—quite reasonably, given Dover’s proximity to France—as the landfall for the invading French army. But even Dover is as much a site of poetic as physical geography, lacking features (such as inns or tradesmen) that would mark it out as an urban space and taking on symbolic significance as the site towards which Gloucester travels on his strange pilgrimage. While felt throughout, however, the indistinct geography of *King Lear* is brought home most powerfully in the storm scenes. Developing A. C. Bradley’s remarks on the peculiar placelessness of *Lear*, Henry Turner has demonstrated how in these scenes Shakespeare manipulates early modern theatrical codes of location-creation so as to confound the audience’s sense of where they take place.³¹ Location on the early modern stage is frequently defined through “counter-places” located offstage (of which the hovel would be one).³² But the problem in the first two major storm scenes, as Turner points out, is that this counter-place fails properly to designate a location for the scene itself, and the sense of spatial limbo is exacerbated by the characters’ prolonged failure to *get* to the nominated counter-place.

In their dialogue, too, the storm scenes are the most disorienting of a disorienting play.³³ Establishing this point will require close attention to the relationship between individual

speeches. The first major storm scene begins with Lear raging against the elements rather than speaking to the figure—the Fool—who accompanies him onto the stage. When the king pauses (perhaps to catch breath), the Fool addresses him thus:

O Nunkle, Court holy-water in a dry house, is better then this Rain-water out o'doore.
Good Nunkle, in, aske thy Daughters blessing, heere's a night pitties neither Wisemen,
nor Fooles. (1665–8)

Lear then continues his diatribe without, apparently, even noticing the Fool:

Rumble thy belly full: spit Fire, spowt Raine:
Nor Raine, Winde, Thunder, Fire are my Daughters;
I taxe not you, you Elements with vnkindnesse. (1669–71)

Or *does* he notice him? Perhaps Lear has half-heard the Fool's words "aske thy Daughters blessing," and these words obliquely inform his comparison between elements and daughters.

These kinds of uncertainties abound in this scene. In the next speech, the Fool moralizes to no one in particular; after this, Lear begins a sentence as though responding to a dialogue already taking place in his mind: "No, I will be the patterne of all patience, / I will say nothing" (1689–90). By this point Kent has entered, and he then asks the question "Who's there?", to which the Fool replies at a tangent: "Marry here's Grace, and a Codpiece, that's a Wiseman, and a Foole" (1691–3). Instead of addressing the figure who has (indirectly) answered his question, Kent asks Lear another direct (and unanswered) question—"Alas Sir are you here?" (1694)—before remarking on the inclemency of the weather. Lear's subsequent line does not make clear whether he has heard Kent: when speaking of the "dreadfull pudder o're our heads"

(1703) he could be using a royal plural; or he could be thinking of the figures with whom he shares the stage (or just one or other of them); or he could be reflecting on humanity as a whole. Kent then pleads with Lear to take shelter, before the king speaks a line that may or may not be addressed to his companion: “My wits begin to turne” (1722). Lear then turns to and questions the Fool—“Come on my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold? / I am cold my selfe” before finally registering Kent’s suggestion: “Where is this straw, my Fellow?” (1723-4).

As readers, we struggle to draw lines of relation between these speeches, rather as we struggle to draw lines of relation between the play’s geographical coordinates; as playgoers, we may find that a scene we thought we knew well appears quite different as individual productions take different decisions as to who is speaking to whom. Our sense of disorientation further increases during the scene’s final moments, as the Fool twice shatters dramatic decorum. First, he sings a snatch of song that shares its burden with that delivered by Feste as the epilogue of *Twelfth Night* (2560–79), thus disturbing our sense that *King Lear* is a world unto itself—a disturbance amplified if, as seems likely, both Feste and the Fool were played by the same actor, Robert Armin; then in closing the scene, the Fool delivers a “prophecie *Merlin* shall make” (1749), an act which insists on a specific fictional temporality (the *Lear*-world predates the Arthurian world) while simultaneously throwing that fictional temporality into doubt (how, then, does the Fool know about Merlin?).³⁴

The following storm scene begins in more regulated fashion:

Kent. Here is the place my Lord, good my Lord enter,

The turrany of the open night’s too rough

For Nature to endure.

Storme still

Lear. Let me alone.

Kent. Good my Lord enter heere.

Lear. Wilt breake my heart?

Kent. I had rather breake mine owne,

Good my Lord enter. (1778–85)

Even here, however, mapping the dialogue is not straightforward. Is Lear’s “Wilt breake my heart?” directed at Kent, or is he thinking of Goneril or Regan, or even Cordelia? Kent’s reply to Lear’s question is also uncertain. Is “I had rather breake mine owne” spoken to Lear, or is it an aside directed towards the audience? Confusing as this is, it is when Edgar-Tom irrupts into the action that the dialogue’s architecture truly crumbles, so that it resembles that of the prior storm scene.³⁵ Consider the following exchange, which immediately follows upon one of Edgar-Tom’s lengthy and baffling oral rambles:

Glou. What, hath your Grace no better company?

Edg. The Prince of Darknesse is a Gentleman. *Modo* he’s call’d, and *Mahu*.

Glou. Our flesh and blood, my Lord, is growne so vilde, that it doth hate what gets it.

(1920–24)

Because Gloucester ignores Edgar-Tom’s words, we may be tempted to dismiss them as nothing but nonsense, or as a continuation of a private narrative of Edgar-Tom’s that is insulated from the rest of the scene’s dialogue: we might, that is, feel that Edgar-Tom could have spoken his line anywhere in the scene to roughly the same effect. And yet the speech is undoubtedly connected to what surrounds it. It may respond to Gloucester’s question by asserting that Lear *is*, in fact, in noble company (perhaps in a court of hell, with the devil as his companion); as such, it would offer an oblique commentary on the scene (Lear is descending into a hellish pit of chaos) rather than a direct response to Gloucester’s question. Or might it

be that Edgar is “breaking through” Tom here, insisting, to the father whose affection he has lost, that he is himself a *gentleman* (albeit in the guise of a further invented identity, the “Prince of Darknesse”). Gloucester’s subsequent line, which hardly follows directly from his previous question, does seem designed to remind us that his own “flesh and blood” is standing directly before him. The point is that we are not sure precisely what to make of these exchanges. The storm scenes are full of moments where Lear, Edgar-Tom, the Fool, and even Kent and Gloucester withdraw into spaces from which they speak to themselves and to absent (or invisible) figures, and frequently it is unclear whether, or to what extent, the characters are hearing and responding to one another. I have pointed above to the possible ways in which Edgar-Tom’s first line responds to Lear’s speech on the impoverished, but it is worth also stressing that one of the difficulties involved in comprehending the utterance “Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe” is that in the storm scenes we are rarely sure whether—or to what extent—the characters’ speeches are connected.

Perhaps even to speak of “characters” here is unhelpful: not only because in this scene two figures are in disguise (Kent more conventionally, Edgar more vertiginously), a third is in some sense “beside himself,” and a fourth, the Fool, inhabits a form of dramatic identity that is never in the fullest sense a “character,” but also because the very basics of theater break down during the storm. This is in great part due to the presence and behaviour of Edgar-Tom. Shakespearean drama of course frequently grants characters far longer speeches than tend to feature in more “naturalistic” theater; but Edgar-Tom’s are elongated in unusual ways and are marked by their “impertinence,” both in that their content is indecorous and in that they do not clearly connect up with—are not always pertinent to—what is happening around them.³⁶ When, for example, Gloucester asks “What are you there? Your Names” (1907), Edgar-Tom says this:

Poore Tom, that eates the swimming Frog, the Toad, the Tod-pole, the wall-Neut, and the water: that in the furie of his heart, when the foule Fiend rages, eats Cow-dung for Sallets; swallowes the old Rat, and the ditch-Dogge; drinkes the green Mantle of the standing Poole: who is whipt from Tything to Tything, and stockt, punish'd, and imprison'd: who hath three Suites to his backe, sixe shirts to his body:

Horse to ride, and weapon to weare:

But Mice, and Rats, and such small Deare,

Haue bin Toms food, for seuen long yeare:

Beware my Follower. Peace Smulkin, peace thou Fiend. (1908–19)

What did Shakespeare intend for the other actors to *do* when the Edgar-Tom-actor embarked on speeches such as this? Freeze until he had finished? Look at him, baffled?

Shakespeare quite frequently has characters “step out” of the drama to comment on the action around them: Leontes’s speech beginning “Too hot, too hot” would offer a good example of this technique (*The Winter’s Tale*, 181–92). In such moments, we are to understand, the other characters cannot hear what is said, and continue to converse with one another as though muted. This dramatic situation has certain correspondences with the effect Edgar-Tom creates: he arrests the dialogue, pulling focus on himself. But the crucial difference is that the other figures onstage *do* hear Edgar-Tom’s speeches, but cannot really do anything while he speaks; and because his lines are not asides in the conventional sense, they really need to offer some entry-point for others to carry on the conversation—but often, as in the example above, they conspicuously fail to do so. In short, Edgar-Tom doesn’t play by the normal rules of dramatic dialogue, and one of the consequences of this is that the figures onstage with him cease to “inhabit” their fictional characters in the accustomed way.³⁷ The Fool’s aforementioned behaviour in the prior scene, while striking, essentially falls within a medieval and early

modern tradition of clowning which punctured, in one way or another, the “world-in-the-play” by moving towards the site Robert Weimann has called the “playing-in-the-world.”³⁸ What is extraordinary about the storm scenes is that Edgar-Tom takes them to a place in which clowning can no longer operate. Exacerbating the disorientation already created through the first scene’s wild dialogue, he explodes the very conventions through which early modern theater, with its minimal scenery, creates a world—by having actors pretend to be other people and by having them speak to one another in a relatively organized way. As the storm scenes progress, they leave the Fool with no settled world to puncture through his clowning, and this may explain his diminished performance in the second and third of them, after which he disappears. To return to my premise: “Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe” records and sympathizes with our difficulty in making sense of—comprehending, and orienting ourselves within—one of the strangest episodes in the history of theater. These scenes leave their audience “all at sea,” divorced from the codes that usually determine theater’s operations; and this outlandish situation is, of course, something hinted at by Edgar-Tom’s maritime idiom.

The line, then, both registers the disorienting effect of the storm scenes’ fragmented dialogue and is itself the best example of such dialogue. And the rupture it effects, I now wish to suggest, can be attributed both to the words themselves—their complex relation to what preceded them; their resistance to straightforward interpretation—and to the position in the theater from which they are spoken. The Folio would suggest that Edgar-Tom’s first line is spoken onstage:

Enter Edgar, and Foole.

Edg. Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe; poore *Tom*.

Foole. Come not in heere Nuncle, here’s a spirit, helpe me, helpe me.

Kent. Giue me thy hand, who’s there?

Foole. A spirite, a spirite, he sayes his name's poore *Tom*.

Kent. What art thou that dost grumble there i'th'straw? Come forth.

(1818–26)

But there is good reason to doubt the Folio's stage direction. For one thing, it suggests that the Fool, like Edgar-Tom, speaks his first line of this scene onstage, but the internal evidence (that is, the directions embedded in the dialogue³⁹) paint a different picture—and one that has, I think, been misrepresented by modern editions which follow the Folio's direction. The Fool's word *heere* surely indicates that he speaks from another space: if he had already come back onstage, then he would presumably have said to Lear: "*Go* not in *there* Nuncle." Where editors *have* been willing to follow the hints offered by the dialogue, and to amend the Folio's directions, is in taking Kent's words "Come forth" to indicate that Edgar-Tom's first line is spoken "within." But where is this "within," exactly? Again, embedded directions provide a clue: the words "Giue me thy hand" imply that Kent reaches down to haul the Fool *upwards* from wherever he and Edgar-Tom encountered one another.⁴⁰

Editors have been cautious in asserting that the hovel is located underneath the stage, and their hesitancy on this point is understandable. In the Folio *Hamlet*, the Ghost's first cry of "Sweare" is accompanied by the direction "*Ghost cries vnder the Stage*" (846); in *Macbeth*, explicit stage directions indicate that the three apparitions descend after they have delivered their equivocations to the protagonist (1611, 1622, 1637).⁴¹ But the lack of a similar direction in *King Lear* should not, I think, preclude the assumption that Shakespeare here wished to use the far reaches of the theatrical space available to him. This is an assumption we can make based both on the embedded stage directions and on the content and quality of Edgar-Tom's speech.⁴² In *Hamlet*, the Ghost's position under the stage suggests that he (or it) has returned to another kind of space, inaccessible to the play's mortals and to the eyes—and thus, in some

way, the *understandings*—of the playgoers; in *Macbeth*, the apparitions’ descent is indicative both of their demonic nature and of their access to a form of truth hidden from everyday experience. In these instances, then, the site in the theater from which lines are spoken helps shape their meaning. In the instance from *King Lear*, Edgar-Tom is speaking of depth (nine feet of it), but he is also speaking of and with mystery, and it is thus appropriate, I would suggest, for his speech to be similarly delivered from under the stage.⁴³ The physical point of delivery echoes the way in which Edgar-Tom, in a more metaphorical sense, speaks “at an angle” to other characters in the storm scenes, exacerbating a situation in which fragmented dialogue has inhibited playgoers’ capacity to orient themselves in the drama.⁴⁴

TRAGEDY AND THE DEEP

If we were looking for a line that epitomized *King Lear*, or more accurately our experience of it, then we might do worse than choose “Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe; *poore* Tom.” Spoken by a figure we cannot see and hinting at meanings we cannot dredge up and fully process, the line, spoken near the center of the play, resonates backwards and forwards through it. As so many of its readers testify, *King Lear* prompts thoughts beyond the reaches of our feet. I shall conclude this essay with some brief reflections on its form of dramatic presentation and its status as a tragedy.

Just as he registers *King Lear*’s disorienting geography, A. C. Bradley is sensitive to how hermeneutic uncertainty is elicited by the play’s gestures towards allegorical literary forms. While it would be “going too far to suggest that he was employing conscious symbolism or allegory in *King Lear*,” Bradley writes, the play “does appear to disclose a mode of imagination not so very far removed from the mode with which, we must remember,

Shakespeare was perfectly familiar in Morality plays and in the *Fairy Queen*.”⁴⁵ It is perhaps Bradley’s notorious opinion that *Lear* is “too big for”—and imaginatively diminished by—the stage, that explains his inability to recognize that the quality of the play to which he draws attention derives, to a great extent, from its stage-action.⁴⁶ The most obvious example of this kind of action would be Gloucester’s supposed “leap” from the cliffs at Dover—an episode that “teases the imagination,” in Maynard Mack’s fine phrase.⁴⁷ Is this set-piece to be read as a figure of frustrated grandeur? Of redemption? Kent’s placement in the stocks is another piece of stage-business that shimmers with allegorical potential—a potential enhanced when Kent apparently remains onstage “between” scenes, incarcerated, while Edgar enters (presumably into a “different” space) to inform the audience of his plan to disguise himself (1251–72). At this juncture we are invited, it seems, to interpret image and language in concert, as though in an emblem book: Edgar’s disguise is just another form of imprisonment in this play of bodily humiliations.⁴⁸

Perhaps this is to misread the image Kent in the stocks provides. My point, however, is that *King Lear* is forever providing us with such material—asking, do you *understand* this? Does it have *significance*? The play resembles a box of parts without an instruction manual: we feel there is something to be made, but do not know how to make it. Language is transmuted to matter, as when earlier talk of eyes and sight is given a brutal physicality in the blinding of Gloucester. Straight after the blinding, Gloucester’s servant goes to seek out “flaxe and whites of egges to apply to his bleeding face” (Q only, 3.7.106–7), recalling the Fool’s moralizing on an empty egg (670–78); an egg (the same egg?) reappears in the speech following Gloucester’s “leap,” quoted above. The “Houel” (1726) in which Lear finally finds shelter from the storm seems obliquely connected to his cry “Howle, howle, howle” (3217), uttered when entering the stage with the dead Cordelia in his arms. We are asked to make sense of such patterns but struggle to do so—it is as though they cohere in a space beyond our ken. And this sense of

having limited vision, of not seeing all the things that there are to be seen, is aggravated when both Edgar-Tom and Lear catch sight of (or pretend to catch sight of) things invisible to us and to other characters onstage: Edgar-Tom's "There could I haue him now, and there, and there againe, and there" (1842–3), referring to the foul fiend, is echoed by Lear's "discovery" of a mouse—"Looke, looke" (2535)—and, most movingly, his claim, in his final lines, that the dead Cordelia yet lives: "Do you see this? Looke on her? Looke her lips, / Looke there, looke there" (3282–3).

Characteristically, *King Lear* provides a dramatic set-piece that bodies forth something like our experience of the play: Gloucester sitting, blind, with his back to a tree, trying to work out what is happening in the battle heard offstage between the French and British powers (2926).⁴⁹ Rotate this scenario ninety degrees, in fact, and it resembles our situation listening to Edgar-Tom cry "Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe" from beneath the stage.⁵⁰ Experiencing *King Lear* is, I have been suggesting, more than a little like fathoming the deep: groping around blindly in dark waters, trying to glean knowledge but having to settle for partial, indirect, and equivocal information. It is perhaps no coincidence that the maritime practice to which Edgar-Tom draws attention is one necessary in foggy conditions: *King Lear* is a play that seems to take place in a mist—one through which we crawl while apprehending profundities we cannot access fully.

This is not a throwaway analogy. Tragedy is almost always concerned, in one way or another, with depth and access to it. Frequently this is because deep spaces harbour the dead; *King Lear* is relatively unusual as a tragedy, in fact, in lacking sustained concern with burial, damnation, or the emotional claims of the departed. (This is a good indication of how unclear the play is in its cosmic architecture and how tight-lipped it is about its missing women.) Nevertheless, when critics speak of the effect of *King Lear*, something to do with its obscurity, with its suggestions of a profundity that cannot quite be plumbed, encourages them to think in

the language of fathoming. *King Lear* “repeatedly falls into the depths,” writes Steve Mentz; Simon Palfrey refers to Edgar as a character whose “actions are often fathomless” and *King Lear* as a play of “fathomless reaches.”⁵¹ An image of deep, inaccessible space helps A. C. Bradley adumbrate the essential “mystery” he believes lies at the heart of Shakespearean tragedy as a whole and *King Lear* in particular:

Its final and total result is one in which pity and terror, carried perhaps to the extreme limits of art, are so blended with a sense of law and beauty that we feel at last, not depression and much less despair, but a consciousness of greatness in pain, and of solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom.⁵²

This, the very end of “Lecture VII,” is the only point in *Shakespearean Tragedy* where Bradley employs the word *fathom*. Stanley Cavell takes an approach to *King Lear* very different from Bradley’s, regarding its tragic catastrophe as a result of complex human interactions rather than mysterious cosmic forces, but he too echoes Edgar-Tom when reflecting on the challenges of interpreting Shakespeare’s play: “I feel confident not only that this play works upon us differently from other modes of theater, but that it is dramatic in a way, or at a depth, foreign to what we have come to expect in a theater, even that it is essentially dramatic in a way our theater and perception do not fathom.”⁵³

These echoes of Edgar-Tom bear witness to these critics’ sensitivity to *Lear*’s peculiar dramaturgy. The play explicitly points towards its own meaningfulness but refuses to disclose a tidy meaning; we are exposed to a plenitude of significance that we can only access at one remove, as the leadsman does the seabed. Edgar-Tom’s line, I have argued, points towards and helps us to understand our difficulty in understanding the play. Creating, in its multitudinous meanings, the very obscurity upon which it comments, it relishes its superflux of signification,

its refusal to be compassed. In imitating an act of navigation, meanwhile, it captures our experience of *Lear*—our groping after meaning, our attempts at orientation within a murky world. But the line is perhaps most effective as an expression, first, of indefinition (Edgar-Tom calls out not an integer but something fuzzier, something beyond a normal category),⁵⁴ and second, of excess: the extra half-fathom gestures towards our difficulty in getting our arms around *King Lear*. For all our efforts, we do not have the “fathom”—to recall *Othello*’s term—to hold it within our grasp.

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¹ William Shakespeare, *The Norton Facsimile: The First Folio of Shakespeare*, prep. Charlton Hinman (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1968), 297. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare’s plays will be taken from this edition (I have modernized the long ‘s’). Through line numbers are provided in parentheses.

² A suggestion also made by Simon Palfrey in *Poor Tom: Living “King Lear”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 49. Any study of words spoken by Tom will now sit in the shadow of this extraordinary book; I have endeavored to indicate my indebtedness to its thinking, but the present essay is perhaps best seen as being in extended dialogue with *Poor Tom*.

³ In addition to lacking the line “Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe; poore Tom,” the 1608 Quarto lacks the two lines in which Lear urges the Fool to enter the hovel (1807–8). As Stanley Wells notes in his Q-based edition *The History of King Lear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Q “as it stands” therefore “provides neither direction nor motivation for the Fool’s exit” (187). A critic (like Wells) wanting to see F and Q as two distinct texts, with F as Shakespeare’s revision of Q, might take this as evidence that F rationalizes stage-action unclear in Q. But this passage might also provide evidence—to me, rather weightier—that Q derives from the same manuscript as F. In arguing that extant versions of *King Lear* are abbreviations of a single manuscript, with the cuts made first by the (then) inexperienced printer Nicholas Okes (Q) and then by the King’s Men (F), Brian Vickers does refer to both Q’s and F’s versions of this scene (*The One “King Lear”* [London: Harvard University Press, 2016]); but he does not, it seems to me, fully appreciate their potential to strengthen his case. Vickers interprets the absence in Q of Lear’s two lines urging the Fool to take shelter as an indication that these were “repetitions” deleted by Okes or one of his employees for the sake of saving space (159); and he argues that “Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe; poore Tom” “must have existed in Shakespeare’s manuscript” because “otherwise the Fool would not have known [Edgar’s] assumed identity” (135) (the Fool runs back onto the stage to tell Lear that the “spirit” calls himself Poor Tom). What Vickers fails to note, however, and what seems to me stronger evidence in support of his one-text argument, is that the stage-action (rather than, more specifically, the text) of Q appears to hold within it a trace of F: Q does not mark the Fool’s exit in a stage direction either overt or embedded in the dialogue, and yet the Fool finds himself offstage, as he does in the more “motivated” (to recall Wells’s term) F text. This would surely suggest that Q derived from an earlier text that also informed F (with F retaining this episode more fully) rather than being an earlier text of which F is a revision.

⁴ For a discussion of the art of fathoming in the pre-modern Mediterranean world, see John Peter Oleson, “Testing the Waters: The Role of Sounding Weights in Ancient Mediterranean Navigation,” in R. L. Hohlfelder (ed.), *The Maritime World of Ancient Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 119–76. It was not until 1911, when attempts were made to time the echo of an underwater explosion, that the depth of water was measured in a significantly different way.

⁵ William Bourne, *A Regiment for the Sea* (London, 1574), 60.

⁶ For remarks on how Western peoples treat the sea as a “space” rather than a “place,” see John Mack, *The Sea: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 16–17; Helen M. Rozwadowski, *Fathoming the Ocean: The*

Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4. For critiques of scholars working within oceanic studies who treat the sea as a site of connection rather than a place in its own right, see Hester Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA* 125.3 (2010): 770–9; Philip E. Steinberg, "Of other seas: metaphors and materialities in maritime regions," *Atlantic Studies* 10.2 (2013): 156–69.

⁷ The geographer Philip E. Steinberg makes a distinction between different cultures across the continent: "While the southern Europeans navigated using rhumb lines, coordinating their position relative to that of sited, coastal land (and thereby downplaying the importance of the ocean environment within which their ships sailed), the ships of the north navigated by lead lines and depth charts whose use was dependent upon site-specific local knowledge of the ocean itself" (*The Social Construction of the Ocean* [Cambridge: CUP, 2001], 70).

⁸ See D. W. Waters, *The Art of Navigation in England in Elizabethan and Early Stuart Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 18.

⁹ Waters, *Art of Navigation*, 324. In the sixty-eighth poem of the sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Mary Wroth's speaker offers an image that demonstrates both her knowledge of the dangers of Goodwin Sands and her understanding of how a ship might fall foul of those dangers: "Like to a ship, on Goodwines cast by wind / The more she strives, more deepe in sand is prest / Till she be lost; so am I, in this kind / Sunk, and devour'd, and swallow'd by unrest" (ll. 5–8). See *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 122.

¹⁰ Both passages from Shakespeare are noted in A. F. Falconer, *Shakespeare and the Sea* (London: Constable, 1964), 83, 86; Falconer also cites the parallel passage from *The Light of Navigation* (83).

¹¹ Cited in William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 299.

¹² Falconer, *Shakespeare and the Sea*, 87–8; Dan Brayton, "Sounding the Deep: *Shakespeare and the Sea* Revisited," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 46.2 (2010): 191, 197.

¹³ Brayton, "Sounding the Deep," 198.

¹⁴ *Fathom* as a verb appears to be moving, in Shakespeare's time, toward the more figurative meanings now dominant. The first of the *OED*'s citations gathered under the definition "get to the bottom of" (v, 4b) comes from a 1633 Massinger play, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. The *OED* also offers the definition "take soundings, lit. and fig." (v, 5), for which the first citation comes from a play written soon after *Lear* (Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy*, 1607) but the second not until 1751.

¹⁵ Critics working within the blue humanities have been sensitive to how Ariel's song's obscure syntax and grammar help evoke the strangeness of the element it conjures to imagination. See esp. Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009), 9; Dan Brayton, *Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 53. For further thoughts on how watery depth suggests the reconfiguration of relations between Ferdinand and Alonso, see Laurence Publicover, "Shakespeare at Sea," *Essays in Criticism* 64.1 (2014): 138–57 (143–4).

¹⁶ As Palfrey notes, to ask what Edgar-Tom's speeches *mean* is to ask a surprisingly novel question of *King Lear*: "The Edgar-part has the second most lines in the play, close to half of them in the voice of Tom (the proportion is impossible to measure). But remarkably little attention has been paid to what Tom says [...] in the main Tom is heard rather than truly attended to" (*Poor Tom*, 67).

¹⁷ Falconer, *Shakespeare at Sea*, 87; Brayton, "Sounding the Deep," 199. Brayton does offer a slightly fuller response to the line—two sentences—in *Shakespeare's Ocean*, 70.

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *King Lear: 1608 (Pied Bull Quarto)*, prep. W. W. Greg (London: Shakespeare Association & Sidwick and Jackson, Ltd, 1939). All references to the Quarto *Lear* are from this edition.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the gendered dimension of chaotic depths in Genesis (and in the Christian and Jewish traditions), see Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), *passim*.

²⁰ The gloss is provided in Jay L. Halio's edition of *King Lear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 183.

²¹ Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*, 15. The line points to a condition of flux that Mentz would, in a later work, associate with "wetness"—a term he uses to contrast a more embodied "shock of immersion" with the "drying-out accomplished by intellectual understanding." See Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550-1719* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xxxii.

²² Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*, 17.

²³ Alternatively, we might imagine the speaker (or the plummet) bobbing up and down, moving from six feet, to three, to nine. What is also uncertain is whether Edgar-Tom is supposed to be touching the bottom when he calls out, or whether this is a depth the plummet has reached without resistance. If the latter, then the "flood" readings make more sense; if the former, it is a question of shallow water potentially spelling disaster (unless we accept Kittredge's "hold" reading, in which case deep water is again the fear). For a discussion of the line's punctuation and its effect on meaning, see also Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 57.

²⁴ For a brilliant discussion of how *King Lear* challenges its audience, see Stephen Booth, "On the Greatness of *King Lear*," in "*King Lear*," "*Macbeth*," *Indefinition, and Tragedy* (Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2001), 15–65. This book was first published Yale University Press in 1983.

²⁵ Both these possibilities—and others—are noted in Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 55.

²⁶ For a discussion of how the speech suggests liquidity and disorder, see Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 54–6. Palfrey goes on immediately to discuss Edgar-Tom's first line, but does not directly argue that its imagined measurement of depth is responsive to this liquidity. For Lear's feminising of his body, see Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (London: Routledge, 1992), 104–29. For the consonance of flux, depth, and femininity in Western thought, see Keller, *Face of the Deep*.

²⁷ Shakespeare uses “and a half” on five occasions: see John Bartlett, *A New and Complete Concordance to Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1894). The “half” may also look back to the dismissal of “half” of Lear's retinue, to which both the king and Regan refer (1441, 1497), and to the splitting in half of the kingdom. Elsewhere in this scene, and again two scenes later (2022–30), Edgar-Tom speaks in rhyming tetrameter (Q sets the latter passage as prose); but nowhere else does he speak in anything that could properly be called pentameter.

²⁸ In a note on p. 237 of *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet", "Othello", "King Lear", and "Macbeth"* (London: Macmillan, 1904), A. C. Bradley makes the intriguing suggestion that in speaking his first line Edgar-Tom tips Lear into madness just when the king was beginning to achieve a clarity of vision. But this reading is dependent on our viewing the king's preceding speech as an example of such clarity. I cannot read it this way.

²⁹ See William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. Martin Butler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 189–90. Butler credits Sympson with this conjecture. The *OED* cites this passage in *Cymbeline* as its only example of the word *crare* between 1551 and 1652, while acknowledging that its very appearance was due to an emendation to the 1623 Folio first made in 1773.

³⁰ The image remains a little obscure, as it is still not especially clear to what “thy” refers in line 2010; but I think we can understand it as the “care” of Melancholy which makes one despondent (“sluggish”), and from which one would seek escape (i.e. by finding a harbour “beyond” melancholy). Edward Dowden's edition of *Cymbeline* (London: Methuen, 1903) comes closer than any other I have consulted to understanding the image in this way: “The meaning is: Who can cast the lead so deep as to touch the dull bottom of the sea of melancholy, and so find the way to a harbour for the craft that sails upon this sea and is its proper voyager?” (140). But in accepting the “crare” emendation, Dowden unnecessarily complicates the image, assuming that it requires an explicit (rather than implicit) vessel. J. M. Nosworthy's edition (London: Methuen, 1955) retains “care,” but the gloss he offers, attributed to Alfred Edward Thielson, avoids getting to grips with how the image works: “Belarius's thought is, how powerless the most friendly well-wisher is to put one who is suffering from Melancholy in the way of getting rid of the clogging load of care” (129). Falconer refers to the image in *Shakespeare and the Sea*; but rather than picking apart how its metaphor works, he instead remarks that the speech “is in keeping with that blend of the practical and the imaginative which is strongly marked in [Belarius's] character” (87).

³¹ Henry S. Turner, *The English Renaissance Stage: Geometry, Poetics, and the Practical Spatial Arts, 1580-1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 155–85. The notion that the storm scenes take place on a heath, Turner demonstrates, came about thanks to the eighteenth-century editors who, working from the principles of post-Reformation theatrical culture, insisted that all scenes must take place *somewhere*.

³² See Tim Fitzpatrick, *Playwright, Space and Place in Early Modern Performance: Shakespeare and Company* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), *passim*.

³³ Turner remarks briefly on how Lear in these scenes refuses to “recognize the presence of [other] characters or the locations they [speak] of” (*English Renaissance Stage*, 175). My purpose here is to extend his insight on the relationship between dialogue and space.

³⁴ Songs did frequently circulate between plays, and were (in Tiffany Stern's words) “from the moment of their composition separate from [any individual] play, even if written for it.” See Stern, “‘I Have Both the Note, and Dittie About Me’: Songs on the Early Modern Stage and Page,” *Common Knowledge* 17.2 (2011): 319. But there is nonetheless something striking about the Fool's/Armin's superimposition of one play upon another. For a more thorough analysis of how the Fool's prophecy puts a strain on our imaginations, see Booth, “*King Lear*,” “*Macbeth*,” *Indefinition, and Tragedy*, 50–2.

³⁵ See Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, esp. 69–70.

³⁶ For a discussion of this rich sense of “impertinence,” see Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 173.

³⁷ Perhaps Edgar-Tom's line “[Poore] Tom's a cold,” spoken four times, twice as a cue, is designed to confuse the actors and upset the linear action to which players and playgoers are accustomed. For a discussion of the cue-parts in *King Lear* which examines this line, see Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, “The Cue-Space in *King Lear*,” in *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 240–64 (esp. 251–5).

³⁸ See Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, 12.

³⁹ See Fitzpatrick, *Playwright, Space and Place*, *passim*.

⁴⁰ It is difficult to imagine Kent's line spoken to a character situated on the same theatrical plane—unless, perhaps, the Fool has stumbled and fallen while running back onto stage from one of the doors or from the discovery space. In mentioning the possible use of the trapdoor, editors are following and developing suggestions first made in Theobald's 1733 edition of Shakespeare's works.

⁴¹ Both the 1603 and 1604 Quartos of *Hamlet* have a similar stage direction. We would, however, have been able to work out that the Ghost in *Hamlet* spoke from under the stage from the dialogue alone: Hamlet's "you heare this fellow in the selleredge" (847) and "Well said old Mole, can'st worke i'th' ground so fast? A worthy Pioner" (859–60) clearly indicate that the Ghost speaks from beneath the stage.

⁴² While critical discussions of the line and of Edgar register this possibility (as in Steve Mentz's cited discussion of a "false-floor effect")—frequently, in fact, without acknowledging that the staging is even in question—I have yet to come across a full assessment of its implications.

⁴³ It is also worth remembering that the identity of the speaker is likely unknown until the words "poore Tom," as the Edgar-actor would presumably use a different voice for Tom.

⁴⁴ The Tom-figure is, in Palfrey's words, "a figure without conventional limits, a limitlessness that corresponds to the unhoused, barely imaginable ambitions of Shakespeare for his art" (*Poor Tom*, 5); how appropriate, then, if his first line were delivered from beyond the confines of the stage itself.

⁴⁵ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 216–17.

⁴⁶ For Bradley, symbols and emblems can operate effectively in poetry but not drama because drama makes things concrete (see *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 220–21). But this is perhaps slightly to misunderstand the nature of the morality drama developed by Shakespeare and his contemporaries: this kind of drama continually asked playgoers to look "beyond" the action to discover its "true" meaning.

⁴⁷ Maynard Mack, "*King Lear*" in *Our Time* (London: Methuen, 1966), 72.

⁴⁸ Lear is, in a sense, "instructed" by the image before him: having cooled his temper, he flares up again on turning to see his servant manacled: "Death on my state: wherefore / Should he sit heere?" (1388–9). The Fool's characteristic commentary on Kent's situation (1282–5) also invites us to find abstract meaning in it.

⁴⁹ Of course, this is itself a piece of stage-action which, in part due to its strangeness, begs to be read allegorically. How long is Gloucester supposed to sit alone onstage, silent, before Edgar re-enters to tell him the result of the battle?

⁵⁰ The space beneath the stage from which Edgar-Tom speaks therefore appears in some ways to signify a "truth" we cannot access; and yet even this apprehension slides from our grasp, for in treating an utterance of Edgar-Tom's in this manner we risk the error Lear makes when seeing "the thing it selfe" in a figure who is—in however complex a way—a man pretending to be someone other than himself.

⁵¹ Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*, 17; Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 17, 21 (see also 2, 129).

⁵² Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 230.

⁵³ Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love," in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 39–124 (91).

⁵⁴ Booth focuses his reading of *Lear* on the play's indefinition, arguing that its characters leak into one another, as though not quite in control of their own membranes ("*King Lear*", "*Macbeth*", *Indefinition, and Tragedy*, 47–55); for Booth this fluidity is characteristic of a play that "pushes inexorably beyond its own identity, rolling across and crushing the very framework that enables its audience to endure the otherwise terrifying explosion of all manner of ordinarily indispensable mental contrivances for isolating, limiting, and comprehending" (23). My understanding of *Lear* is significantly indebted to Booth's insight, and I would argue that the uncertainty over the relationship between pieces of dialogue (analysed above) adds to the quality he identifies in the play. Booth also connects this quality of *Lear* to its tragic effect: the "response we record when we label an event tragic is a response to the fact of indefinition. [...] literary works we call tragedies have their value as enabling actions by which we are made capable, temporarily, of enduring manifestations of the fact that nothing in human experience is or can be definite" (9).